ASPECTS OF THE 'CLASSICAL' IN THE WORK OF PETER COLLINS

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The recent return of the term "classical" to the forefront of architectural thought is perhaps nothing so much as a matter of convenience, as it has a certain comfortable vagueness about it which, one suspects, many commentators find useful when faced with the embarrassing diversity of current work. Its connotations and implications are sufficiently diverse that, superficially at least, it is capable of making good journalistic order out of the likes of Graves, Stern, Bofill, Rossi, Isozaki, etc. (in such efforts as Charles Jencks' *Post-Modern Classicism: The New Synthesis* of 1980). It works because although, like "humanistic" and "organic," the application of the "classical" within architectural thought often verges on the meaningless, it does generally call up clear enough images of axial symmetry, columns with tops and bottoms of some kind, relatively sedate proportions, an occasional pedimented roof, and the *de rigueur* Schinkel *Sammlung* on the coffee table—even though all (save perhaps the last) of these could equally well be present in very non-classical designs. In any event, "classicism" and its various forms seem currently to make good titles for conferences under which to invite promising young designers; or good theme issues for major architectural periodicals.

If what we want to say is that the Portland Building, or the Altes Museum, or the Pantheon, is a "classical" building, then the loosely arranged collection which we hold in our minds is probably more or less sufficient. We sense that "obviously" these buildings have something of the "classical" which is important about them. But upon looking further into what really could be meant by aspects of "classicalness," we find that the implications diverge considerably. They seem to form themselves into three interlocking but distinguishable clusters of meaning more-or-less related to each of the forms *Classic, Classicism,* and *Classicist.* For example, we would need to ask whether Schinkel, say, was a "Classicist," whether his works therefore conformed to "Classicism" (or to "Neo-Classicism"), and whether the Altes Museum is necessarily then a "Classic" work. And do all of these need to be simultaneously affirmative? What then do we say of his "medieval" projects? What of Le Corbusier, and the Villa Savoye? What of Philip Johnson's works of the sixties? (Though they portray "obvious" attributes of "*Classicism*" surely they're not "classics?") And even if a building portrays "*Classicism*" does that make its designer a "*Classicist*"? Another way of clarifying the three groups of meanings is to distinguish whether the concept "Classical" is best defined in contradistinction to "romantic" or "expressionistic" (other theories of artistic creation), to "medieval," "mannerist," "baroque," or "vernacular" (other formal styles or object groups), or to "fashionable," "populist," or "cyclical" (other concepts of quality and duration).

In order for the terms of the "Classical" to be useful in any way beyond their usual imprecise application in architectual journalism, and (more to the point here) in order to discover how a consummate Classicist like Peter Collins could have such a low opinion of such ostensibly "classical" works as James Stuart's house in St. James Square, or John Summerson's book *The Classical Language of Architecture* (and, for that matter, of most of the so-called "classical" architects so far mentioned here), we clearly need to explore further the distinctions among the different senses in which one can a) be a "*Classicist,*" b) conform to "*Classicism,*" and/or c) create or appreciate "*Classic*" works.

For Peter Collins the "Classical" was an intense conviction, and one which therefore required great care with the terms by which it was to be understood. My intention here is to offer a perspective which I hope will be useful in two ways: First, in the context of this volume, to clarify in what sense we may say that Peter Collins *was* a consummate "*Classicist*"—in what light can be appreciated the rigor, consistency, and endurance of his beliefs; and second, in the larger setting of architectural discourse, to offer ways in which the terminology of the "Classical" might (despite its periodic popularity) be used with a bit more precision. There is in fact considerable etymological and literary evidence for the assertion that there are *three* general sets of connotations embedded in the "Classical." Its roots and forms in the major European languages provide the means to more clearly discriminate the several senses alluded to above.

The first of these is closely related to the oldest, Latin, root *classicus,* pertaining to "the highest rank or quality," particularly as that quality was later identified by its durability as a useful standard of excellence. By "*A Classic*" we therefore mean an exemplar, whose distinction is proven by a long-standing consensus. Their term is necessarily judgmental and temporal—having to do with both the assigning of value and the passage of time, and the endurance of value over time. The Maison Carée and Chartres Cathedral are "*Classics,*" and we speak of "Classical" music, in that sense. It is the body of permanently esteemed work in a field—often, but not by any means necessarily, from antiquity or possessing the outward appearance of "*Classicism*"...

The second of these connotation sets seems most closely related to an early ninteenth-century neologism (the origins of which Peter Collins, with characteristic tenacity, traced in three languages) which is probably most appropriately rendered by the German *Klassizismus.* Part of the new art-historical interest in "style," was an attempt to describe as such the artistic forms of the ancient Greeks and Romans, and was of course soon particularly associated with those who, in a self- and style-conscious sense, and with great ar-

chaeological exactitude, imitated them. "*Classicism*" is a category of characteristic attributes derived from association with a particular historical period, and (especially as "Neo-Classicism," to which the German form most closely corresponds) became a doctrine of renewed pursuit of those attributes. The term is essentially formal and stylistic—having to do with the description of objects, their categorization into groups, or subsequent efforts to knowingly make new works to resemble them. Most of our "obvious" image connotations of the "classical" (symmetry, the orders, and archaeologically-verifiable proportions and details) are attributes of "*Classicism*" in this sense. As a design method permeated by formal and stylistic concerns, it is undertaken often, but not necessarily always, through the inner motivating spirit of a "Classicist"...

The third cluster of meanings is the most complicated to define, partly because its disentanglement from "*Classicism*" has to be made, for the sake of argument here, somewhat artificial. Yet however artificial it may seem today to separate the formal attributes of a created object ("Classicism") from the attitudes and sensibilities of its creator (a "Classicist"), the fact remains that, especially in France, something we would have to call classical *thinking* pre-dated even the invention of the term "classicisme" by at least two centuries. And by distinguishing the definition of classical *thought* from that of classical *objects* we can better explain how, strictly speaking, there can be one without the other. (It should be mentioned that this is not a distinction which Peter Collins himself emphasized, as is clear from his use of the term "Classicism" in its current English sense to mean also simply "the beliefs of Classicists." But he seems to have been inclined to mistrust the term, at least in its historic context, for its having been merely one of a whole spate of new "-ism" words—e. g., nationalism, socialism, rationalism—introduced in the decades following the French Revolution which may have been motivated as some sort of substitute authority; and certainly for its having been in its origins dangerously close to the German art-historical notion of a "style".)

The classical sensibility which I have identified here through the term "*Classicist*" (the one who holds it) probably had its most consistent and inspired expression in the architecture of the great French classicists whom Peter Collins so admired: the Mansarts, de Brosse, Boffrand, J. F. Blondel, etc. The form which this thinking took prior to the invention of "le classicisme" in the early nineteenth century is best revealed through contemporary French literary doctrine, between which and architecture there was in fact important mutual influence. So in the spirit of the French literary concept of "le classique," the third cluster of meanings pertains to a sensibility—cultivated through a seasoned maturity and confident self-restraint—inclined towards, in the words of Henri Peyre (from the chapter entitled "The Ideal of Art" in his *Qu'est-ce que le Classicisme?): decorum, endurance, order, clarity, serenity, simplicity,* and the *dissimulation of effort.* Nicolas Boileau, in his *Art Poétique* of 1674, had formulated a similarly well-rounded doctrine of attitudinal classicism which included in addition: *verisimilitude*—an evident plausibility derived through reason, common sense, and the social usefulness of the work of art. The "*Classicist*" is defined by an attitude toward the purpose of art in relation to a constituency, to tradition, and to cultural and technical authority; and toward the role of the artist in relation to the nature of the creative process.

In the course of his career Peter Collins worked toward explaining and justifying this kind of classical thought in architectural terms. Unpublished notes connected with one of the last projects of his life, a lecture course entitled "Classicism" given at McGill University in 1979 and at the University of Cincinnati in 1980, reveal this thinking in its most developed state. An architectural "*Classicist,*" in the sense in which the French architects of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries remain supreme exemplars, would manifest concern for the following:

1) *Theory*, meaning the result of a rational study of examples of contemporary excellence. The Classical can be assessed and justified *intellectually* and through consensus since it is not emotionally, whimsically, or idiosyncratically based.

2) *Proportion*, meaning the clear geometric order of the natural structure, expressed through standardized elements. The Classical can be justified *structurally* since it reveals, or is inspired by, a coherent and reasonable structural system. (This accounts for its frequent affinity with "*Classicism,*" the most complete, expressive, and durable of such systems.)

3) *Perfection*, meaning an ideal which is approached through evolutionary rather than revolutionary change. The Classical can be justified *enduringly* since it disdains fashion, seeking instead to place itself in the longest possible temporal context. (This accounts for its having produced the major share of "*Classic*" works.)

4) *Continuity*, meaning a respect for the traditional past of place (contextual), of building-type (typological), and of the techniques and principles of the discipline as a whole (architectural). The Classical can be justified *historically* since it eschews mimicry and stylistic conformance, yet adapts precedent creatively in light of situational constraints.

5) *Appreciation*, meaning the capacity of the work to be enjoyed on many levels of taste, despite its high and conscious standards of quality. The Classical can be justified *publicly*, since it does not rely for its validation solely on knowledge of the individual artist's expressive intentions or of esoteric speculation within the field for its validation.

Of course it will be realized that to talk intelligently about this frame of mind in modern English requires using the term "Classicism." But it is perhaps only safe to do so if in full recognition of the differences between classicism as a *way of thinking* and classicism as a *category of objects.*

In his theoretical, historical, and critical work, Peter Collins sought not only to explain the classicist sensibility but to live up to it as well. The essays presented in this volume will make very clear the essential recurring themes of his thought, but what might be emphasized here is the overall integrity they reflect in light of the various aspects of "classicalness" so far defined.

In respect for the integrity of the "*Classic,*" for example, were his belief that historical scholarship should distance itself from the recent past, his wariness of published criticisms of new buildings, and the tendency in his own critical writing to defer to the known consistency of larger standards. All these reflect the conviction that judgments of merit in architecture require the perspective of the largest possible timescale. Excellence, in classical terms, requires physical and cultural *endurance*—the salient feature of "Classic" status. Hence, for example, the fashionable "Classicisms" of the early sixties and the late seventies were never really even in contention.

In contempt for the superficiality of stylistic "Classicism" (indeed for most of the art-inspired techniques of *Kunstwissenschaft*) was his conviction that historical scholarship should concern itself with how a building was commissioned, pro-

grammed and constrained by technical and environmental conditions, not merely how it looked, or into which arbitrary and post-rationalized chrono-morphological pigeon-hole it could most easily be placed. It was the nature of the creative act of design, at least as much as the visual attributes of the language employed, which was to be regarded as classical. This is why he so disdained the approach exemplified in Summerson's *The Classical Language of Architecture*, and why he so enjoyed both reading and performing situationist "debunkings" of the stylistic approach (such as Forster and Tuttle's 1971 *SAH Journal* essay on the Palazzo del Te, which he gleefully regarded as having helped drain the concept of "Mannerism" of most of its meaning).

And prominent in his admiration of the French "*Classicists*" was his belief that they were, because of a rigorous theoretical basis and a healthy interactive relationship with historical precedents, more free as designers than either the *style*-ists (who like Le Corbusier, were artificially constrained by a hyper-consciousness of the *Zeitgeist*) or the archaeologists (who, like James Stuart, were excessively constrained by the technique of mere mimicry). The measure of their talent was in the use of such freedom to solve difficult problems well, and to evince in the results decorum, sensible reasoning, and the dissimulation of effort.

Finally, from his vantage point as a "Classicist" there emerged a forceful critique of heroic abstract sculptural Modernism, as will be apparent in the remainder of this volume, particularly amidst disparaging references to Le Corbusier and his influence. This critique is based on the following grounds: a) that it (what we now call, stylistically, "Modernism") seemed often to be proceeding without coherent and historically-rooted *theoretical principles;* b) that it fallaciously regarded architecture as more kindred to abstract art than to rationally *proportioned structure;* c) that it overemphasized the expressive freedom of the heroic individualist-architect in an atmosphere of revolutionary fashion-consciousness, rather than a search for *durable perfection;* d) that it usually conceived buildings as isolated sculptural objects, seldom sympathetic to the *historic continuity* of the urban environments in which they were placed; and e) that it was devoid of the details, visual character, and refined subtlety which give human scale and interest to the environment, and help foster the *public appreciation* of architecture.

When most of these essays were written they were highly polemical on these issues, and their author virtually alone among major critics in remaining less than enthusiastic about so much of modern architecture. Since then, of course, the critique of "Modernism" has become widespread. It is now, one could almost say, virtually complete; and key points of contention have included most of those just listed. So although the manifestations of "Post-Modernism" (including its currently popular wave of so-called "Classicism") clearly represent just another ephemeral fashion, there increasingly appears to be lying beneath and behind them a return of genuine concern for theory, history, precedent, context, ornament, and authenticity. And this fact should at least offer us the opportunity to consider the persistence of these issues in the writings of Peter Collins (despite the vicissitudes of fashion throughout his life) not only as a record of his tenacity, genius, and dedication to principle, but as a promise of true "Classic" *endurance* for the standards of a true "Classicist" scholar.

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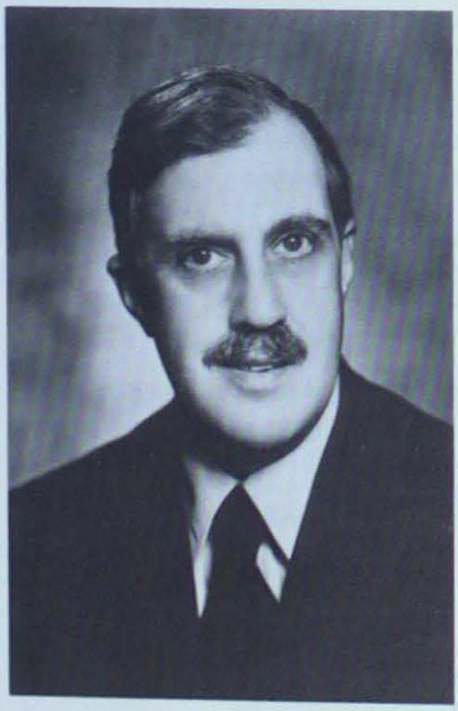

Peter Collins 1920-1981